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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 000600

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA AND NEA/IPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/26/2008

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SUBJECT: JORDAN-BASED PNC LEADERS SEE PLANS TO CONVENE
THROUGH LENS OF FATAH-HAMAS RIVALRY

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Arab media outlets have in recent weeks reported discussions in Ramallah of the possibility of convening the Palestine National Council (PNC) in the coming months, either in Ramallah, Amman, or Cairo. Post's PNC contacts including Speaker Salim al-Zanoun confirm moves are afoot, seem to take them seriously, insist Ramallah is the likely venue, and offer a relatively consistent assessment of the underlying motive: to bolster PLO Executive Committee (EC) Chairman (and Palestinian Authority President) Mahmoud Abbas and his supporters in the face of the ongoing challenge from Hamas. The PLO's "parliament in exile" has not met officially since 1996 in Gaza (where, two years later, in the presence of President Clinton, it also met informally to reaffirm its annulling of parts of the PLO Charter that called for Israel's destruction). Since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the PNC has in many ways been superseded by the PA as the locus of Palestinian politics, but the PLO officially remains custodian of ongoing negotiations and the umbrella organization representing all Palestinians. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Hamadeh Faraneh, a member of the Palestine Central Council (a PNC subset that meets when the PNC cannot) attended the recent meetings where convening the PNC was discussed. Detecting skepticism in our queries about the likelihood of convening the PNC, Faraneh retorted that "it'll be held, quorum or not, like 1984 in Amman." Note: The legitimacy of that 17th PNC conclave in Amman was questioned because various faction leaders, including the PFLP's George Habash and the DFLP's Nayef Hawatmeh, refused to attend. End Note. Faraneh added that "the results will be positive," but did not elaborate. He divided the tasks before the PNC into "organizational" and "political" matters. Organizationally, the PNC must elect a new EC and choose new PNC leadership, and do the same for the Palestine National Fund. On the political side, the PNC's political program will be reviewed. The last time that happened, said Faraneh, was 1988, when the U.S. was still "the main enemy" and the Soviet Union was "our only friend."

Gerontology a Factor...

¶3. (C) Ibrahim Abu Ayyash, an "independent" PNC member with strong Fatah affiliations, met with us a day after he returned from Ramallah where he had attended a meeting of the preparatory committee planning the PNC conclave. He is one of two Amman-based PNCers on the preparatory committee, along with Ishaq al-Khatib. According to Abu Ayyash, Abbas is afraid of losing the EC's quorum due to attrition. He pointed out that nearly one-third of the EC has passed away since they were last selected, and the by-laws say that if one-third of the seats are vacant, a PNC meeting is required. Secondly, said Abu Ayyash, PNC Speaker Zanoun is getting

old, tired, and quite sick and has made it clear that he "wants out."

¶4. (C) Zanon, whom we met on February 24 at PNC headquarters in Amman, was not quite so glib with us, but said his poor health will keep him off any slate of candidates for the PNC leadership. Comment: Zanon was named PNC Deputy Speaker in 1971, and Speaker in 1996. Now in his mid-70s, he came across as mentally acute, illness notwithstanding. End Comment.

...But HAMAS Challenge is Key Impetus

¶5. (C) The age factor is not new, however, and Abu Ayyash assessed that behind Abbas's present urgency is his need to bolster his legitimacy, and that of the PLO, in the face of recent Hamas criticism that the institution no longer represents the Palestinians. Note: Hamas has publicly attacked plans to assemble the PNC, arguing that to do so would contravene the March 2005 Cairo Agreement in which Hamas and Fatah agreed to work together on PLO restructuring.

Its spokesmen have also called into question the very legitimacy of the PLO. End Note. Some on the PCC - mainly the PFLP - worry that holding a PNC meeting will just exacerbate Fatah-Hamas tensions, and questioned the need to rush.

¶6. (C) Faraneh questioned rhetorically why those who caused the intra-Palestinian split - Hamas, in his view - should have a veto. Even the PFLP was sympathetic to this perspective, he said. Zanon's take was similar, and he did not bother even to feign interest in trying to bring Hamas and other rejectionists into the fold. In his view, when

AMMAN 00000600 002 OF 003

Hamas talks about being a part of the PLO, it really is talking about taking control, in proportions commensurate with its majority in the Palestine Legislative Council (which he argued was artificially inflated because voters at the time had wanted to send a message to Fatah, but were not necessarily hard-core Hamas supporters). Zanon claimed he had opposed holding the Cairo meeting in March 2005, and argued that Hamas had made any agreements inoperative with its Gaza coup. The proper way to reform the PLO and the PNC was not from the ground up, but to bring in new members and factions according to the existing PNC rules. Zanon went on to lament how much damage extremism had done to the Palestinian cause, and said that Hamas was far better at destroying than creating anything positive.

¶7. (C) In Faraneh's estimation, the PNC leadership's desire to defer the broader question of Hamas' integration into the PLO makes holding a meeting more likely now than previously: there are fewer competing interests to satisfy, and fewer contentious issues (e.g., wholesale restructuring of the PLO) to discuss. Although the PA parliament, whose members are part of the PNC, is dominated by Hamas, both Faraneh and Abu Ayyash were sure no one from Hamas would show up. "Hamas won't attend," Abu Ayyash asserted, "they are attacking the idea of convening the PNC." Zanon said Hamas would not attend unless it were agreed beforehand to give it the pride of place it has in the PLC, which was not about to happen. Comment: The question of Hamas' attendance is further complicated - though from Fatah's perspective, perhaps simplified - by the fact that many of its PLC members remain in Israeli incarceration. End Comment.

¶8. (C) More generally, Abbas may be trying to disentangle the PA from the PLO, reversing some of the efforts of Yasir Arafat who had, according to Abu Ayyash, mixed and matched their functions in part as a way to dilute their respective powers. "Most of us believe the peace process is not coming to a positive end by 2008, 2009, or 2010, so we have to keep the PLO alive," he said, chuckling. Zanon focused more on the uncertainty of when and whether the Hamas-Fatah rift

would be healed. The Cairo agreement will only again be in effect if Hamas retreats from its control of Gaza, which might not happen for "a month, two months, or two years"; during this time, Zanoun stressed, the PLO had to revitalize its institutions.

Ramallah Favored Over Amman, Cairo a Distant Third

¶9. (C) Post contacts strongly felt Ramallah would be the venue for any PNC meeting, citing its symbolic importance as the seat of the Palestinian leadership and its location in the occupied territories. Faraneh said simply: "Yes, it will happen. Yes it will be in Ramallah." Abu Ayyash offered more by way of explanation, noting that all members from Amman could make it to Ramallah except Taysir Quba'a, who would not be allowed in by Israel. Zanoun was sanguine that Israel would, as it had in the past, allow PNCers living abroad to attend. He concluded that the objections of 25 Damascus-based rejectionists who were members of the PNC would not rule the day, nor would their presence in Damascus suggest that the PNC should meet there.

¶10. (C) Abu Ayyash said Abbas is pushing for the PNC meeting by the end of April, or mid-May at the latest, but personally believed that July was the earliest the PNC could meet. A meeting sooner is not possible, as there are too many necessary preparations, he said. Among them are the selection of new delegates from the various professional unions and organizations that make up a substantial portion of the PNC. For his part, Zanoun said a June timeframe was realistic.

Modalities Remain Murky; Abbas is No Arafat

¶11. (C) When we asked Zanoun who would attend the PNC meeting and who would be the likely nominees for its new leadership, he smiled and recalled with equal measures of wistfulness and cynicism the "genius" of Yasir Arafat, who had so skillfully manipulated Palestinian institutions and individuals. "If someone were angry in Ramallah, he'd give him a seat" Zanoun said, summing up Arafat's approach to patronage. Zanoun observed that Abbas lacks similar political acumen, which leaves the precise method for selecting new PNC and EC leaders up in the air. He predicted that a list of new EC members would be put forth for a consensus affirmation, but that if people objected or put themselves or others forward as candidates, an actual election would have to be held.

AMMAN 00000600 003 OF 003

¶12. (C) According to Abu Ayyash, Abbas adviser and the secretary general of the engineers union Marwan Abd al-Hamid

SIPDIS

has proposed that the professional unions choose new PNC representatives, something that in Abu Ayyash's estimation may actually happen. He said the teachers' union leaders are preparing to do so, for instance. If Abbas gives the green light, and perhaps some logistical help, these elections could take place in relatively short order. Ayyash said that at a recent PCC meeting he (jokingly) raised the possibility of the political factions electing new leadership, but laughed as he asked us to imagine DFLP's Hawatmeh brooking any competition. Still, he expected the political factions will nominate some new faces to attend the PNC. The next preparatory committee meeting is scheduled for March 1.

Comment

¶13. (C) Our conversations with PNC members in Amman reflect only one snapshot of the thinking within the Council. Possibly more significant than whether the PNC convenes or

not - and there are still numerous barriers to overcome before that point is reached - is the recurrent theme of how little energy there is to uphold the oft-touted but rarely practiced principle of Palestinian unity across the Fatah-Hamas divide. Revitalizing the PNC/PLO equals countering Hamas, according to this view. Of course, there may be recognition within PNC circles that this is wishful thinking: Zuhair Sanduka, who is responsible for PNC parliamentary affairs, lectured us at some length that what is really needed to counter Hamas is to "give" Abbas tangible gains on the ground and in peace talks to show Palestinians the fruits of moderation. A gathering with symbolic votes and speechifying is hardly a magic bullet for boosting the reputation and legitimacy of the PLO. End Comment.

¶14. (U) This message was coordinated with Consulate General Jerusalem.

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